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UNDP Special Representative
in the Palestinian Territories

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UNDP ASSISTS THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

For the last two decades, United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, has been assisting the Palestinian people in the areas under the Israeli occupation and recently under the Palestinian National Authority. The programme includes technical as well as financial assistance. Timothy Rothermel, UNDP Special Representative in the Palestinian Territories elaborates on UNDP activities in the territories as well as the difficulties it encounters.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Recent political developments between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel - the Oslo Accords of 1994 - have resulted in the Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, where the Palestinians have established their National Authority. But more than twenty seven years of Israeli military occupation have left the Palestinian territories in dire need for economic and social development. To assist the Palestinians in rebuilding their infrastructure and improve the quality of their lives, the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, has been active in the Palestinian territories for several years.

Our guest today, Timothy Rothermel, is UNDP Special Representative in the Palestinian territories.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Rothermel are Ian Williams of the *Tribune of London* and Mohammed Saad of the *Voice of America*.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rothermel, Welcome to **World Chronicle**.

ROTHERMEL: Thank you very much Sir.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rothermel, tell us a bit about the operations of UNDP and your particular programme in the Palestinian territories. How much money is being spent, how many people do you have working there, what is the main focus of your activity?

ROTHERMEL: Well the work of UNDP is somewhat different than in almost any other place where UNDP operates. Because we are involved in capital as well as technical assistance. In other words, bricks and mortar as well as the traditional training activities that UNDP does. The size of the program last year in calendar year 1996 was approximately fifty million dollars, making it one of the largest UNDPs in the world. The number of the people directly employed in offices in East Jerusalem and Gaza are approximately one hundred and thirty people. The program is essentially self supporting, that is, it does not receive a great deal of support for its administration from UNDP headquarters; so we are essentially supported by overheads on what are what we call trust funds from bilateral donors.

LITTLEJOHNS: Who is the main donor, the United States?

ROTHERMEL: No. the main donor is Japan followed by the other major ones would be Italy, Norway, Sweden the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say bricks and mortar, I mean you presumably don't mean that literally. You are not doing building there?

ROTHERMEL: Yes, yes Sir we are. We're building housing, we're building – we probably built since the almost twenty years in the program – we've probably constructed forty to fifty schools in the West Bank and Gaza Major editions on hospitals, some minor road building activities, building health clinics – so it's not the typical UNDP program.

SAAD: Did you seek the help of any other arab country, especially the rich Gulf States?

ROTHERMEL: We have and we have received some funding from the EGG Fund, where we are getting more cooperation more recently is from some of the neighboring countries in terms of training activities. We're working in public administration in helping the Palestinian Authority for example, to establish an audit, a National Audit Authority. In helping the Ministry of Finance train their people and we're having very good cooperation from both the Jordanians and the Egyptians in this regard. Basically, as far as UNDP is concerned, the answer is no, there has been no major financial contribution from some of the richer Gulf Countries.

WILLIAMS: You were working there when the whole area was under complete Israeli military occupation...

ROTHERMEL: Right.

WILLIAMS: And now you have to sort of pie balled area where you have little patches under Palestinian Administration, where all of the main roads – all of the cross roads -- are controlled by the israelis. Is your work more, or less difficult now than it was before?

ROTHERMEL: In a sense it is more difficult particularly when as it were at the end of July and through and up until now. These very heavy closures and there is not only the closures that involve going from Israel to Gaza, but also internal closures which means that, for example, if you live in Nablus, you can't leave Nablus. Or if you live in Ramallah, you can't Ramallah and then there are the usual closures going into and out of Jerusalem itself. It means for our work – that if – as I mentioned we're involved in, building activities. If a contractor in Nablus has some members of his crew who live in Ramallah, they can't get to work. So it has been an impediment really to our work through the course of this year as well as it was last year.

WILLIAMS: So it's worse than it was before in some ways.

ROTHERMEL: In some ways yes. On the other hand, there is a, in some of the, what they call Area 'A' which is where the Palestinians have control, there is a sort of euphoria, a great building boom. Many, many ex-patriot Palestinians returning to build on the land which they value so much, there is still very much Israeli control under the area that is called 'C'. And that again means that if we are, for example, doing works in water supply

and sanitation, laying pipes, there are certain joint Israeli/Palestinian mechanisms that have to be consulted before we can carry out these activities. Which is a slow down, it does impede.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned the house building, and traditionally ex-patriots from around the world what they do is go back and they build mega mansions floor by floor...

ROTHERMEL: That's exactly what they do.

WILLIAMS: And I have seen in the West Bank even ten years ago, they use to call it the steadfasters money. All of these houses rising up the hills. But now, are they putting money into productive investments? Or are they...

ROTHERMEL: It is coming slowly. And I guess you can say the glass is half full or half empty. I prefer to say that it's half full and it's remarkable what has been accomplished in three years in a Palestinian Authority. But there are still laws that need to be passed to look into the investment climate. There is still – it's not a place where I think, you or I would, if we had the money to invest, would be the first place we would want to invest our funds. On the other hand, there is a buoyant growing private sector, which I think is essential for the future of the Palestinians.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rothermel, speaking about ex-patriots. Tell us a bit about this Transfer of Knowledge Through Ex-Patriot Nationals Top Ten Program.

ROTHERMEL: You've spelled out one of the difficult UN acronyms. It's been an extremely effective program. And what Top Ten does is basically permits ex-patriot nationals – and they are, as you know, many more Palestinians in the diaspora than inside the West Bank and Gaza – to return to their homes, their country for a period of generally of three months, sometimes six months and sometimes it has been extended for a year. And they are involved in literally all sectors of society. Be it assisting government institutions, even institutions that are not cabinet – members of the cabinet, for example, the National Bureau of Statistics has been established. They can also assist in the private sector, these are people with generally specific skills that want to return to their origins. They are of course, are fluent in Arabic, they are familiar with the culture and customs of the society, and they provide a very valuable input in terms of support to the Palestinian authority and society in general. For example, we had people who are working in the health field, specialist in various branches of medicine. Even though the airport is still not open in the Gaza strip, we're providing assistance to the Civil Aviation Authority in terms of safety standards. There is assistance to the Ministries of Planning, Finance, etc. So there has been a large number of people who have come, interestingly enough, some of the Top Ten experts have come back to Palestine and have decided to lay their roots there, and remain permanently. But they are

professors, they are Bankers, they are Lawyers, they are from all walks of life in the ex-patriot Palestinian community.

SAAD: We all know that the Palestinian labor force is dependent on jobs in Israel, and unemployment is increasing especially during the closure of the border. How do you help in job generation?

ROTHERMEL: It's just to emphasise what you said, the closures are absolutely devastating as far as the economy is concerned and the Gaza strip is probably fifty per cent unemployment.

LITTLEJOHNS: Fifty per cent?

ROTHERMEL: Yes. What we have done, and it's been the largest activity that UNDP has carried out in the last two years, has been employment generation activities. Particularly in Gaza, but extending now to the West Bank. You would not believe Gaza if you took a snap shot three years ago and took a snap shot today. How it's been transformed as a result by -- and these are emergency employment generation activities: cleaning, tiling, paving, building public parks, building buildings, we're involved right now in the construction of a museum in Gaza using traditional construction measures. Basically at the end of the day a worker comes home with ten dollars. But the ten dollars represents, really the life blood for a family, in the Gaza strip, for ten to twelve people. So there has been massive employment generation programs that have been supported through UNDP and the Palestinian Authority. It's a very effective program that is actually managed completely by the Palestinian Authority with very little oversight from UNDP.

SAAD: You are talking about the West Bank and the Gaza. Do you provide any help to the refugees in the camps and Jordan, Syria and Lebanon?

ROTHERMEL: No. When we started out, the origins of the program began almost twenty years ago by a General Assembly resolution passed in 1978. One of the first activities was in fact, to assist refugees living in Syria, with the Agriculture Development Program. But since that time, the Palestinian themselves have asked UNDP to concentrate its focus and activities in the West Bank and Gaza. And as you know, UNDP is active in the other countries outside the West Bank and Gaza, where refugees are located and there are services provided to refugees by UNDP. But our so called Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People has its geographical focus on the West Bank and Gaza.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned water projects..

ROTHERMEL: Right.

WILLIAMS: Now this is one of the key highly sensitive strategic issues because for years -- while settlements -- Israeli settlements have been allowed to pump as much water as they want, the Palestinian have not been allowed to sink wells. Even now, I think it is one

of the issues that is left for final settlement because Israel has sort of been drawing upon the West Bank aquifers and doesn't want the Palestinians using what it now considers to be their water. How do you have water projects under those circumstances with this pie balled area? Are you allowed to drill in one area and not in another? Or do you have to clear with the Israelis before you can drill in Hebron?

ROTHERMEL: Under the Taba Accords, I think it is article 41, specifies a Joint Committee that will....

LITTLEJOHNS: What do you call it?

ROTHERMEL: Taba, which were the accords that were following the Oslo agreement between Israel and the PLO.

WILLIAMS: Taba is a little Egyptian town... the border...

ROTHERMEL: Anyway, so yes, we can do things. One of the things we have been doing more than becoming involved in this Area 'C' where the Israelis still have control is just rehabilitation of the existing systems. For example, with support from Norway, UNDP is involved in rehabilitation of the water supply system in Jericho, in the Jordan valley. It's amazing to see these old pipes that are dug up out of the ground that were probably laid fifty or sixty years ago, that water even flowed through taps to residents living in Jericho. So there are rehabilitation activities that are fairly easy to do -- on the other hand, we are involved in new water works in areas where we do along with the Palestinian authority, go to the Joint Committee with Israel and we have not been blocked from undertaking activities in this area. We have been working for example, along with USAID in a separate project on the famous Jahuda Street in Hebron, where so many of the troubles have been, taken place in the past.

SEED: As a follow up....

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Timothy Rothermel, UNDP Special Representative in the Palestinian Territory.

SAAD: As a follow up to the water question, of course this is waste water, sometimes we see or we watch tv, the refugee camps in bad conditions, the sewage and the sanitation is very bad. How difficult is it a problem to you?

ROTHERMEL: It's a very difficult problem. I mentioned there are recent major efforts that we have been involved in employment generation, prior to that for several years the major focus was water supply and sanitation, particularly in the camps. The first program got started about ten years ago in the Jamaliah refugee camp in Gaza and we were involved in sewage treatment facilities, household connections for the individual homes and this has been followed in other refugee camps in other parts of the occupied territories.

SAAD: Yeah, but there seems a chronic problem.

ROTHERMEL: It is a chronic problem but I think it's one that is capable of solution. There were fifteen years ago, just vast pools of open raw sewage in Jamaliah, that has disappeared today. And you see more and more homes connected with water supply with support from the US government for example, the Kasabah the old city of Nablus, now, all homes have water, individual water connection. So it's a very difficult problem, water is a very difficult issue in the Middle East in general, but I think it is one that is capable of solution.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rothermel, what is the population and what roughly are the demographics of the area that you are dealing with?

ROTHERMEL: Very interesting question because we are in the process right now of developing the first census. But the population is approximately three million people. About one million in Gaza, two million in the West Bank or slightly less. There are villages and rural areas of the West Bank that are even more poor than Gaza, but generally Gazans are poorer. I can't give you a per capita income estimate. Palestinians are generally well educated, they are basically the Palestinians form the backbone of the UNDP operations. We only have four international professionals, myself and three others working in the office. Our engineers, our procurement people, our administration people are all highly, highly talented Palestinians.

LITTLEJOHNS: And the overwhelming majority are what... under twenty five?

ROTHERMEL: Yes, they would be. Yes.

WILLIAMS: Now getting back to the pie balled subject of the Israelis again. I think once we have spoken to people who have worked in UN operations, and they have said frequently -- they were, in the past, they were harassed by Israeli officials. How is your working relationship with them and come to think of it, do you have any problems with the Palestinian Authority in terms of obstruction. Because I understand one of the few growing employment sectors is government to work with the bureaucracy of the Palestinian Authority.

ROTHERMEL: Mr. Williams, nothing is ever perfect. But going back to the early days of the program when we had to receive the blessing -- not the official comment – but the tacit understanding of permission to undertake activities with the Israelis, there were sometimes delays, but I can say honestly they have never been turned down. We have worked together in a very transparent manner and that continues up to the present day. The Palestinian Authority is a new so called government – it's not a real government yet, that does have growing pains and when people say to me, Oh my gosh, they are so disorganized in this or that sector, I look at the history of my own country, the United States and see how long this country existed in absolute chaos before there was a constitution...

WILLIAMS: Do you think that has changed?

ROTHERMEL: I think there has been absolutely remarkable progress in a very short time. Some of the Ministries are extremely well organized. I cite for example the Ministry of Education. Which is defined as a governmental bureaucratic institution designed better than any other country in the world. They are doing absolutely a superb job and there are other ministries that are equally well organized, and one of the privileges UNDP had three years ago, was to assess in getting some of these ministries started from scratch, literally with two or three people in them. Many are up and functioning quite well. It's a difficult thing to provide governance for a country when you don't know the population, you don't know the size of the country, what its geographical boundaries are, you don't know from one day to the next about the free movements of goods and people. So in those circumstances, to govern is quite remarkable.

WILLIAMS: We've interviewed in the past on this program the heads of the UN Relief And Works Association, which was set up specifically for the Palestinian refugees, so how do you avoid duplication with their efforts for all of these years, they were providing pretty much the educational service in Gaza and the health service.

ROTHERMEL: We have been working closely with UNWRA, and of course, UNWRA is much larger than UNDP and they have been in the area for much longer. The principle work of UNWRA is to provide educational and health services for registered refugees or their descendants from 1948. UNDP's mandate is a multi sectoral one, not limited to refugees, so we have worked very well together. We have done activities in the refugee camps that I mentioned, the example of Jamaliah before, but our mandate is slightly broader than that of UNWRA.

SAAD: How far is your cooperation with the NGO's that work in the area?

ROTHERMEL: It's an interesting question. When the Palestinian Authority was first established, they quite frankly were very weary of NGO's. I can remember the President himself saying, please be careful about support to the NGO's because there is a new governmental institution, it wanted to have the control. In recent months, probably the past year, that attitude is changing considerably. And as you know, NGO's are very important to Palestinian society because they provided the quasi governmental equipment, or machinery for the people during the occupation. You have for example, health institutions, professional associations, chambers of commerce, they were doing extraordinary work throughout the period of occupation and there is a growing realization on the part now of the Palestinian Authorities that Non Governmental Organizations are an important part of civil society in Palestine. So we are for example, doing some land reclamation work in the Hebron area, utilizing some agricultural Non Governmental Organizations. The government, the Palestinian Authority its Ministry of Agriculture, has agreed that yes, funding can be used to

directly support work of NGO's. So it's changing and I think it they will continue to be a very important and vibrant part of the Palestinian society and culture.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Ruthermel, the slowing down of the peace process, of course, is extremely disappointing. How has that affected your operations and is there anything that you can do in the area which might contribute to somehow or other, loosing up that bottleneck?

ROTHERMEL: Well it has taken a lot of enthusiasm away from our operation. I think some of the bilateral donors that are very well disposed towards Palestinians, their funding is drying up and as a result, the funding that UNDP has is beginning to decline. How can we help? In one way in addition to just strengthening the Palestinian institution is our role. UNDP has in a modest way done some activities involving peace making, involving getting Palestinian and Israeli institutions to work together. It's something that can't be forced, but we can act a bit as neutral or as honest brokers. There is obviously a great deal of expertise in agriculture and many other areas, in health – in the Israel. And a lot from which the Palestinians can benefit. On the other hand, it's a kind of thing that after occupation, after the adversities, it's something that is going to take time to nurture very carefully. But we can have a modest role, I think.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you receiving financial and other assistance from Israel?

ROTHERMEL: Nope. We certainly receive though, a great deal of moral support. I can remember even long before the Oslo Accord, when senior officials from the government of Israel would come here to the United Nations to have a meeting with the Secretary-General. Inevitably at the end of the press release, and the communique would be in, and Prime Minister X urged the Secretary-General to provide more resources to UNDP to carry out its activities. So there has been a great deal of support from that side.

WILLIAMS: If one wants to be cynical though, your, they wanted UNDP to provide the money which it was their responsibility to occupy the provide the services?

ROTHERMEL: Absolutely. In a sense, we may have suffered a bit from that because we were building sewer treatment plants, which under the fourth Geneva Accords, the occupying authority were suppose to build, though the Administrator of the UNDP took a conscience decision that this was not going to realistically happen. So, UNDP should step in and undertake some of these activities. So yes, we were supporting activities that probably, or not probably – that should have been taken by the government of Israel.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rothermel, we have only less than a minute left. You mentioned that there were about three million people in the area where you have your operations going. Is the rate of population growth very considerable...

ROTHERMEL: Yes, one of the highest in the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have population control programs then?

ROTHERMEL: Yes, well, family planning activities and the UN Fund for Population activities is playing an increasing role. They are in the process of undertaking the first census, there are a number of activities supported by UNDP itself in the area of women health and reproductive health. So it is an area receiving attention, there has not been however, a massive decline in the birth rate.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rothermel, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Mr. Timothy Rothermel, UNDP Special Representative in the Palestinian Territories. He was interviewed by Ian Williams of the *Tribune of London* and Mohammed Saad of the *Voice of America*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns, thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us on the next edition of **World Chronicle.**